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ABSTRACT

Assumptions that writers of books about creative writing make about their audiences, as well as assumptions about the purposes, practice, and value of writing, differ noticeably from the assumptions made by people who teach and write about composition. In substance and form, the range of creative writing books includes autobiography, interviews, hints, advice, instruction, heuristic questioning, and exercises that are arranged as memoirs, essays, lists, manuals, handbooks, encyclopedias. Conversely, composition teaching and textbooks do not sufficiently draw on the drama of creativity. Creative writing books assume that expression is a basic human urge. While composition teachers and the authors of composition textbooks admit the difficulties involved in writing, they elide the value of inspiration. The assumption that their readers want very much to write well allows writers of books about creative writing a deep and sustained focus on craft. In these practical books, doing exercises--not drafting, revision, or editing--is emphasized as important to writing practice in ways most teachers have yet to imagine in composition texts. These books are inspiring because of their seductive approach to self-expression, creativity, art, and they seem more detailed in terms of the practice of writing than do most composition texts. There needs to be a similar richness and variety of personas in composition textbooks and classrooms in order to work through myths about writing and talent. (A 20-item selected bibliography is attached.) (SAM)

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RHETORIC OF WRITING INSTRUCTION: LEARNING FROM CREATIVE WRITING "HOW-TO" BOOKS

Like everyone here, I imagine, I hang out in bookstores. On my way to the cookbooks or to the section labeled "The Occult," I avoid "Fiction" and "Classics" because, I tell myself, I have no time to actually read. I have no time to read fiction and classics because I should be reading my students' compositions. In fact, I should be reading those instead of being at the bookstore. When I remember this, I either go home or to the "Reference" section, where, if the store is large enough, there might be some books on writing among the dictionaries of slang and treatises on peculiar etymologies, and I can imagine I am doing my life's work even at the bookstore. I try to see if there's anything here about learning how to write that I'm missing when I'm home reading student papers.

Of the selection of these books that deals only with writing, with how-to-write--rather than editing, marketing, and publishing (and ignoring for the moment specialized manuals on how to write grant proposals, resumes, news articles)--what I initially notice is that there are quite a few of these books available, and none of them resembles the textbooks I choose from to teach writing to my freshman university students. Of course, I teach expository writing, and these are mostly books about creative writing--character, dialogue, narrative tension, and all that. But consideration of the elements of fiction--character, dialog, narrative tension, point of view, figurative devices, description, style, and more--make for the best expository and argumentative writing. Expository writers surely aren't forbidden any techniques, forms, strategies that are peculiar to creative writers. And what about that idea of students seeing themselves as writers, writers of anything and everything?

These books may find their way into classrooms, but they get there by way of popular presses and bookstores, not publishers' reps. Could it be there's something like a parallel universe, outside the university, of writing instruction? Suspending for a moment the cynical view that this universe does rely on publishers' ideas about who is most gullible right now, and on writers who just can't get seem to get started on their next projects, is it possible that this other universe is more entertaining, more useful, more compelling? Assumptions that writers of books about creative writing make about their audiences, as well as assumptions about the purposes, practice, and value of writing, differ noticeably from the assumptions made by people who teach and write about composition. It is a matter of different audiences and purposes, but maybe it isn't just that. The differences suggest to me ways to revise changes some of my

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approaches to students' writing, even though these approaches are integral to my teaching and to the discipline. I'll try to identify a fraction of those assumptions and differences here.

In substance and in form, the range of creative writing "how-to" books includes autobiography, interviews, hints, advice, instruction, heuristic questioning, and exercises--arranged as memoirs, essays, lists, manuals, handbooks, encyclopedias. Professor of creative writing Hans Ostrom, writing in the AWP Chronicle about the value of these books identifies them as "more than books on writing: They are apologiae, reading lists, survival manuals, autobiographies" (1). I think of the range of possible work as on a continuum resting on two fundamental aspects: on one side, the "being a writer," and on the other, the "doing" of writing. At the extreme end of the "being" side of the range lie books of interviews of writers, such as the series of Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Janet Sternberg's editions of The Writer on Her Work, and Mickey Pearlman's Listen to Their Voices: Twenty Interviews with Women Who Write, which are fascinating, but far more inspirational than instructional and which I won't deal with here. For my purposes, using the examples I've chosen, the range extends from elaborate treatments of a single writer's life/work, such as Eudora Welty's One Writer's Beginnings and Annie Dillard's The Writing Life to the other extreme, the very prescriptive, instructional and exercised-based works, such as David Madden's Revising Fiction, Jerome Stern's Making Shapely Fiction, and Anne Bernays' and Pamela Painter's What If? Writing Exercises for Fiction Writers. Somewhere along the middle of the continuum are works that combine inspiration and instruction, that treat the being a writer and the doing of writing, such as John Gardner's On Becoming a Novelist, Brenda Ueland's If You Want to Write, Natalie Goldberg's Writing Down the Bones and Wild Mind, and Sam Hamill's translation of Wen Fu: The Art of Writing by Lu Chi. This last group of books both inspire by the example of the author's life and give advice and direction for writing practice.

I can't quite imagine a similar range in composition textbooks, because composition students and teachers don't think as much about a sort of "cult of the artist," upon which the "being" end of the spectrum depends, when they set to work: a few textbooks that investigate revision of professional essays and the use, in some texts, of student comments to accompany student writing samples is about as close as we come. One difference between creative writing and composition related to this seems to be a kind of drama, the drama of fiction, of the Life of a Writer, with which these books about creative writing are filled. I suppose it derives from the drama of creativity itself. In my teaching about writing, I don't draw on that enough, and neither do my textbooks.

Most obviously, writers of books about creative writing assume that 1) their readers are nearly dying to write, that writing is important; 2) there is something rich and strange and overwhelmingly fulfilling about being a writer--that being a

writer is a worthy goal; and 3) that their readers agree. Although behind these assumptions lie some fairly complex myths, they contribute to the identification, by authors of creative writing how-to books, of purposes for writing that we would only very tentatively assume for our composition students. For instance, these authors assume that their readers write in spite of the possibilities of great discouragement. Brenda Ueland begins with a chapter entitled "Everybody is Talented, Original, and Has Something Important to Say," wherein she writes: "This creative power and imagination is in everyone, and it is usually drummed out of people early in life by criticism (so-called 'helpful criticism' is the worst kind) by teasing, jeering , rules, prissy teachers, critics, . . . Sometimes I think of life as a process where everybody is discouraging and taking everybody else down a notch or two" (5). John Gardner writes that "The whole world seems to conspire against the young novelist. . . . And the discouragement offered by other human beings is the least of it" (xxv-xxiv). In contrast, I most often assume that my students don't write, haven't written, and that although my students have something important and original to say, we'll probably never get to it. I realize these authors have selected a different audience than I have, but I know my audience encompasses theirs--I do have students, more than a few, who are, maybe secretly, nearly dying to write, and I know that some composition textbook writers acknowledge the general human urge to express. It's just that when I'm faced with a classroom of college freshman, with the intention of inviting them to write brilliantly and critically on many subjects they have never before thought about, I feel a bit embarrassed and naive, if not downright misleading, discoursing on the subject of the creative urge, its power and mystery. I need to find a way to do that.

In terms of audience, what is most obviously different from, say, Natalie Goldberg's Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within, and for instance, any composition textbook, is that Goldberg more easily assumes that there is a "writer within" and that this writer will happily risk at least $9.95 on the chance of getting free. The most important thing I've learned from this work is that I'm dissatisfied with my own and many textbooks' "constructions" of student writers--so many inherent assumptions about fear, confusion, lack of skill, lack of interest. When an author says, in effect, "it's hard, but I'll hold your hand" (I say this in the classroom all the time), the rhetoric of the author (teacher) sometimes creates a hand that needs to be held. We've gotten to the point of admitting the difficulties, but, unlike Brenda Ueland and others, we may not have gotten to the part about inspiration--it's like we've forgotten why we're doing all this: is it all for good writing? (Creative writing how-to books reveal interesting, different definitions of "good writing," but I haven't time to cover that here). As has been pointed out often enough, we get the audience we wish for, the audience we negotiate for by reconstructing it in our writing. Because the task at hand--the composition--is so obviously not art, not intended to be art, teachers and textbook writers cannot invoke the worthiness, valid or not, of the artist's

struggle. Do we want to see our students' writing as art? Do we see our own that way? What would it take to be able to do that?

The assumption that their readers want very much to write well allows writers of books about creative writing a deep and sustained focus on "craft." "Craft" is an important word here, perhaps because even a novice can devote herself to craft, if "art" seems too daunting. The emphasis on "craft" underscores the necessity for painstaking work, but also the possibility of being able to do that work. At the practical end of the creative writing how-to spectrum, writers treat the practice and the process of writing in very detailed ways. For instance, Jerome Stern's encyclopedic Making Shapely Fiction has 58 pages on various "shapes" of fiction, such as "Facade," "Iceberg," "Onion," "Explosion," many of which would fit nonfiction as well--16 shapes in all. In Part III of the book, "An Alphabet for Writers of Fiction," he's written 16 pages on choosing a point of view (which is, after all, just another way of looking at considerations of audience), as well as sections on ambiguity, beginnings, imagery, style, subtlety, voice, workshops--things my composition students need to know about. Bernays and Painter devote many exercises to developing a sensitivity toward language; for example, in the section "Mechanics," they suggest writing a story all of words of one syllable (194); they suggest going over a piece with five different-colored highlighters to mark words communicating the different sense impressions (181). Madden's Revising Fiction is exhaustive: 185 explanatory sections, headed by heuristic questions. He phrases these question in the negative form, because, he writes, "the achievements of your first draft are thrillingly in evidence, while their effects depend critically upon your identifying the negative elements and dealing with them (xvii)". We wouldn't dare phrase such questions negatively, would we? In the section on point of view he asks: "Considering the experience you want the reader to have in this story, have you used a point of view that is ineffective?" "Have you failed to imagine other point of view techniques and their possible effects on the reader?" "Have you not yet achieved the proper distance between yourself and your material?". From the section on style: "Does your style fail to work upon all the reader's senses?" "Do you neglect to prepare contexts that will enable you to use the device on implication?" "Does your diction seem unconsidered?" Each question is followed by two or three pages of information on strategies to correct problems. Much of the work suggested in these books, exacting as it is, seems intended for experimentation in the practice of writing. What in these practical books comes under the heading of craft is not so unfamiliar, but it's all got a sort of "drama of the real" going for it, grounded in the assumptions that the readers of these books really want to write well, and that they would fool around endlessly until they could.

In these practical books, doing exercises--not drafting, revision, or editing--is emphasized as important to writing practice, in ways I haven't imagined, yet, for my composition classes. Natalie Goldberg, in Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life gives four rules (they are: keep your hand moving, be specific,

lose control, and don't think--not so very different from what Elbow and all of us after him might say). She intersperses very short personal essays on "Style," "Structure," "Verbs" and less predictable subjects with 35 "Try This" suggestions. Sometimes these exercises resemble journal exercises ("Play with the idea of home" (96)), but the more interesting ones do not: she suggests writers do "oral timed writings" (65), "Make contact with a writer you know about (126), "Make a list of words you really like" (194), "Put aside one day a month to do nothing" (231). Bernays' and Painter's What If? consists of 83 exercises, for all stages of the writing process, with student and professional examples. These books are inspiring because of their seductive approach to self-expression, creativity, art, and they seem more detailed, in terms of the practice of writing, than many composition texts. These writers concoct entire books of writing exercises: hundreds of exercises before drafting, exercises just for the sake of experimenting, for tuning into choices, and then exercises to use on pieces that seem unsuccessful, with examples of revisions of published work. The suggestions for invention and revision aren't so different from ours, but the quantity, detail, and the insistance on experimentation, on trying something different suggests entirely new courses, entirely new experiments in curriculum to me.

I'm not saying we can know all of this stuff or use all of it. What's important is that we could re-visualize what we do know and use in light of it, in ways individual to each of us and to our classes. Ostrom suggests that major contribution of books about creative writing is the revision of "our mythology of writing and talent." Even the books by writers of unknown or questionable ability are important because they show readers how to survive as a writer. Because of these books, he suggests, "We are less inclined to insist that talent is delivered to men from God and that the fittest (male) writers survive" (9). He identifies a spectrum of books guided by the personas of teachers, editors, scholars, or writers. We need a similar richness--a variety of personas--in composition books and in our teaching, so that we can work out and work around our own myths of writing and talent. All this might be just to say that I wish a most accomplished, prolific, and famous writer of freshman essays would write a charismatic book on how to do it, with many highly defined and proven exercises. Or that we might assume that students for whom writing "creatively" would be an engaging task could do so, and that all the attention to truth, detail, and point of view that they would pour into that work would be of great benefit to any writing they'd do.

Handouts: Exercises

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